

Redemptive existentialism and Berkeleian metaphysics: a synthesis in Beckett's plays

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Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* are traditionally associated with Sartrean existentialism in that they deny any inherent purpose to life. However, a careful reading of the two plays shows that they need not be read as despair-ridden and pessimistic. Aware of the potentially devastating implications of Sartre's philosophy, Beckett offers a way for humans to find essence by highlighting George Berkeley's idealism, in which nothing exists without being perceived. Through the repeated motif of perception, Beckett's plays include in Berkeley's ideology, which holds that being recognized is at the heart of meaningful existence. The result is a Beckettian synthesis between existentialism and idealism wherein humans, thrust into a world with no essence, construct significance through perceiving and being perceived. *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* suggest that though meaning may not be inherent in the world, our sense of self and happiness is irreducibly tied to the way we are acknowledged, and that we are empowered only when we are accepted by ourselves and others. In the postmodern world where ambition, technology, and chaos often leave one to retreat into self-imposed loneliness, Beckett's dramas convey that introspection and interdependence are at the crux of purposeful life.

In *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, both written in the 1950s, Samuel Beckett examines the emptiness of human existence, especially acute during the post-war era. His plays, which express the banality of life through seemingly meaningless repetitions, have been associated with existentialism in that they deny any inherent purpose to life. However, a careful reading of *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* reveals that Beckett's plays need not be interpreted as despair-ridden and pessimistic. A dialectical reading of the plays illustrates that Beckett offers a way for humans to find essence in life by showing his audience what *not* to do; in other words, by repeatedly exposing why his characters Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp are unhappy, Beckett highlights their weakness and in turn suggests what one *should* do in order to overcome life's barrenness. Beckett's solution to existential despair derives from Berkeley's idealism in which nothing exists without being perceived. Beckett applies this ideology to the human psyche and dramatically conveys that although meaning may not be inherent in the world, humans can find essence in our relationships and interdependence.

After the Second World War, Samuel Beckett played a large role in shaping the literary movement that would

later become known as postmodernism. Emerging from the horrors of genocide and destruction, many writers struggled to make sense of the atrocities they had witnessed and were further disappointed by the new Cold War. The apparent lack of progress in history inspired postmodernists to express the bleak human prospect in their works. In particular, playwrights reflected the transitory and incoherent nature of human existence in the Theatre of the Absurd, in which "men and women, as Shakespeare says, were viewed as mere actors in an absurd play, making their entrances and exists upon the stage of life and mouthing their tales 'full of sound and fury,' signifying nothing."¹

Among the most influential postmodern plays are Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, both closely associated with absurdism and existentialism. Noting the barren yet symbolic details of his works, the philosopher Alain Badiou describes Beckett as "a writer of the absurd, of despair, of empty skies, of incommunicability and of eternal solitude – in sum, an existentialist."² Above all, Sartre's philosophy – which argues there is no intrinsic meaning in human existence – permeates *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. Considered the father of existentialism

and a contemporary of Beckett, Sartre held that existence is prior to essence and that humans come into being without inherent significance. Existentialism thus "places the entire responsibility for [one's] existence squarely upon [one's] own shoulders."³ Though Sartre himself did not necessarily intend his philosophy to be pessimistic, Beckett showed that the seeming meaninglessness of life could lead individuals into despair. The seemingly purposeless lives of Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp epitomize the Sartrean individual who struggles to make sense of life's seeming insignificance.

The Sartrean existential struggle is apparent even from the first line of *Waiting for Godot*. The bare setting of "A country road. A tree. Evening" immediately conveys emptiness; roads and trees, which are conventional symbols of life, are barren, suggesting a lack of abundance. The use of participle – the continuous and unfinished form of the verb – in the title of the play is also significant because it suggests that nothing worthwhile happens in life as Vladimir and Estragon idly wait for Godot to appear. Furthermore, the play opens with Estragon exclaiming that there is "nothing to be done," in response to which Vladimir confesses, "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion."⁴ There really is nothing to be done in a play in which two plain characters wait, passing the time with verbal and physical repertoire. There is no coherent story, point, or design in the play, and Vladimir and Estragon's lives are reduced to meaningless repetition and banter. In fact, the two characters even dismiss existence as a sort of a problem to be solved:

Vladimir: Suppose we repented.

Estragon: Repented what?

Vladimir: Oh... We wouldn't have to go to into the details.

Estragon: Our being born?⁵

Being born becomes an occasion to repent for, as if existing is a sin, a fault, a regrettable fact. Vladimir also directly represents Sartre's notion of the universal individual, the idea that one man represents all of mankind because "in choosing for himself he chooses for all men."⁶ For example, Vladimir convinces Estragon that they should help Lucky by claiming: "at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late!"⁷ Because one always chooses what one believes to be the best, each decision a

person makes serves to define the ideal for all of humanity. In this way, not only does *Waiting for Godot* capture the boredom and insignificance of an existential life, but it also relays Sartre's sentiment that the choices individuals make necessarily affect everyone else.

Similarly, *Krapp's Last Tape* harkens to Sartrean existentialism with its mindless repetitions and lack of a traditional plot. It is interesting to note that the play is set in the future; though the play takes place in late evening in the future (suggesting the end of time), Krapp possesses no intelligible sense of his past and thus fails to attribute meaning to his life. For instance, Krapp does not remember his journal's contents when he rummages through them, even when they involve something as grave as his mother's death: "mother at rest at last.... Hm.... The black ball.... [*He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.*] Black ball?"⁷⁸ Krapp repeatedly raises his head and stares blankly into space in hopes of remembering, but his life, too, has been reduced to fragments of random and redundant moments that have lost significance. Krapp's life lacks any sense of progress since what he thought was most important in his past years – discoveries, thoughts, and philosophy – are no longer valuable to him. In fact, they torment him to the point where he cannot even stand to listen to them again. When the younger Krapp in the tape shares what sounds like an epiphany and reads, "what I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—," Krapp angrily switches off the tape and curses as he fast-forwards through the next few minutes of the tape. He comments, "[I've] just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for 30 years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that."⁷⁹ Instead of leading a fulfilling life, Krapp has spent his time on earth in a meaningless acquisition of years, exemplifying Sartre's philosophy that life is inherently meaningless.

Despite Sartre's belief that existentialism is empowering because it allows one to freely determine one's own essence, Beckett recognized how dangerous an inherently meaningless life could be for the individual; after all, Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp are all unhappy. As such, Beckett employs strong currents of Berkeley's idealism in *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* to suggest a possible solution to the seemingly hopeless existential life. Building upon

Sartre's notion of the universal individual, Beckett's plays endorse Berkeley's idea that one cannot exist happily on one's own because being recognized is at the heart of meaningful existence. Berkeley, an eighteenth-century idealist, famously argued that "*esse is percipi*": that to be is to be perceived.¹⁰ He posited that everything in the realm of awareness – form, colors, texture, taste, etc. – are ideas perceived by the senses and concluded that everything in the world, including individuals, exists only when acknowledged by a perceiving mind. When Berkeley wrote that "all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth have not any subsistence without a mind" and that "their being is to be perceived or known," he contended that nothing truly exists until perceived by a conscious mind.¹¹

When analyzed from a Berkeleyan point-of-view, *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* show how life becomes reduced to a series of boring, meaningless, and fragmented moments when no one is really "looking." The plays reveal "a universe of insignificance, its tension created by the conflict between the insignificance and man's effort to give himself meaning despite everything."¹² However, difficulty arises when a man tries to give *himself* meaning; though Beckett may believe in the individual ability to determine essence, he suggests that we cannot conceive meaning on our own because we are relational beings.

One commentator agrees when he shares that "Beckett may be wishing to apply to mind Berkeley's notion of the relativity and dependency of the sensible object."¹³ Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp are all occupied with perception: they crave recognition and become depressed when they are deprived of it – this explains why Vladimir and Estragon endlessly wait for Godot and why Krapp only seems to recall people's eyes. Through the repeated motif of perception, Beckett provides a Berkeleyan answer to the potentially devastating bleakness of existentialism. The result is a Beckettian redemptive existentialism in which our sense of self and happiness are constructed only when we are perceived, both by ourselves and others.

Evidence of Vladimir and Estragon's tireless desire for recognition pervades *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir repeatedly wakes up his sleeping friend until Estragon exclaims, "Why will you never let me sleep?" Vladimir simply

answers, "I felt lonely,"¹⁴ as if he cannot stand not being looked at even for a minute because he is afraid he will cease to exist when no one is aware of him. Even Pozzo, a master and therefore arguably the most powerful character in the play, repeatedly asks for attention when he utters, "is everybody ready? Is everybody looking at me? Will you look at me, pig!"¹⁵ However, the correlation between being seen and existing becomes most clear when Vladimir converses with the Boy upon learning that Godot won't be coming that evening:

Boy: What am I to say to Mr. Godot, sir?

Vladimir: Tell him... [*he hesitates*]... tell him you saw us. [*Pause*] You did see us, didn't you?¹⁶

Here, Vladimir and Estragon seek recognition from Godot before Godot arrives, and this exemplifies Beckett's synthesis of existentialism – the philosophy that existence precedes essence – and idealism – that to be is to be perceived. A similar dialogue takes place when Vladimir learns once again that Godot won't be coming in Act II:

Boy: What am I to tell Mr. Godot, sir?

Vladimir: Tell him... [*he hesitates*]... tell him you saw me and that... [*he hesitates*]... that you saw me. [...] [*With sudden violence*] You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!¹⁷

There is a strong need for Vladimir to know that he had been seen; Berman explains that "[in Beckett's plays] minds become dependent, vulnerable beings; they need the support and comfort of being perceived."¹⁸ Beckett's characters express their basic desire for acceptance through their obsession with being seen.

The Berkeleyan "to be is to be perceived" axiom is also present in *Krapp's Last Tape* as Krapp ends his reclusive life in deep unhappiness. During the play, we learn that Krapp had been distancing himself from others because of his artistic ambitions. "As the tapes make clear," Gordon analyzes, "he has pursued the life of the mind, separating the 'grain' from the 'husks' following his 'vision' that would, so he thought, survive his infirmity."¹⁹ The extent to which Krapp preferred solitude is clear when he records that he "celebrated the awful occasion [of his birthday], as in recent years, quietly at

the Wine-house” with “not a soul” around him.²⁰ Instead of choosing to take a break once a year to celebrate his birthday, Krapp took even that time to pursue the life of a writer. However, this commitment to achievement only leaves him restless, and he repeatedly confesses his loneliness: “[I] never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited.”²¹ We learn that even his career has been unfulfilling, as only “seventeen copies [of his book] sold, of which eleven [were sold] at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas.”²² Though he invested himself in the life of a detached artist, he returns again and again on the tape to the moments he wants to relive, and to his disappointment, Krapp learns that beauty lies in moments shared and not in the achievement of brilliance. In accordance with Berkeley’s philosophy, Krapp’s greatest moments were those concerned with recognition.

Krapp, like Vladimir and Estragon, strongly desires to be seen, as evidenced through his obsession with eyes. His insatiable appetite for recognition, coupled with his misery due to his failure to connect with others, suggests that a meaningful existence cannot exist without others’ perception. Krapp is particularly obsessed with the female gaze. For instance, though he calls his relationship with Bianca a “hopeless business,” he fondly recalls her eyes as “very warm” and “incomparable”; he remembers “not much about her, apart from a tribute to her eyes.”²³ Similarly, Krapp is drawn to a particular nurse because she happened to be looking at him: “whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me... [...] The face she had! The eyes!”²⁴ Krapp seems incapable of remembering people unless he feels acknowledged by them. The crucial boat scene to which Krapp returns time and time again confirms how important the female gaze is for Krapp’s sense of self:

“I said again I thought it was

hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [Pause.] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments – [Pause.] after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. [Pause. Low.] Let me in”²⁵

Here, the last sentence – “Let me in” – though unmistakably sexual in suggestion, also functions as Krapp’s metaphysical plea: the girl needs to help him belong to this world. In his analysis, Knowlson acknowledges that the girl’s eyes not only serve as windows to the soul, but also as mirrors, reflecting and confirming that which is before them.²⁶ This is why Krapp cannot stand having the girl’s eyes in the sunlight and creates a shadow so that she can look at him properly: he needs to know that he is being perceived thoroughly to feel grounded. The present-day Krapp repeatedly returns to this part of the tape because this instance of companionship, gaze, and intimacy was when he felt most alive.

Lastly, Beckett shows the importance of self-perception for meaningful existence through Krapp’s inability to address his present self. In Beckett’s adaptation of idealism, self-recognition is just as indispensable as others’ recognition in shaping one’s existence. Krapp is always recording to his future self or listening to his past self; he does not, or cannot, ever face his present self. To complicate matters further, the play is set in the future: Krapp “lives entirely outside time in a no-man’s land,” a place of “a repeated past and anticipated future.”²⁷ The tape recorder limits Krapp to his past or future self, and his present self is preoccupied with everything but the now. “The words that Krapp had recorded so many years ago,” Knowlson observes,

“now represent the only form of contact that he can achieve in a depleted, solitary, almost totally barren existence.”²⁸ If time is a relative term and reality is constructed of perceiving minds and ideas, Krapp never truly exists because he is never in the present.

Beckett uses the Berkeleian notion of perception in *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape* to offer a solution to the problems that existentialism creates. The two plays echo Sartre’s philosophy in their suggestion that there is no necessary or inherent purpose to life. However, Beckett provides a way out from existential despair in Berkeley’s idealism, the philosophy that nothing in the world is made significant until chanced upon by a perceiving mind. Beckett’s philosophy precludes passive and reclusive lives from being meaningful, and in this framework, Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp’s lives serve as the antithesis of the ideal lifestyle we should be pursuing. In short, Beckett’s characters show what we should *not* do if we desire a purposeful life.

Ultimately, in the postmodern world where technology and ambition promote self-reliant individualism more than ever, Beckett warns that a meaningful existence can seldom be achieved alone. Despite life’s seemingly inconsequential repetitions and routines, there is essence to be found, and, according to Beckett’s drama, self-conscious trueness to the present self and the willingness to be perceived by others are at the crux of purposeful life. One must perceive oneself and one another in order to find meaning in this world. We cannot thrive on our own. Reconciling with the past, taking advantage of the present, and forming relationships with others ultimately point us to Beckettian redemptive existentialism – the philosophy that existence can be empowered when we are perceived, and that only when we are accepted do we find meaning and significance.

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